# Religion in the Earth's Children Series of Books by Jean M. Auel

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## Abstract

The Earth's Children series of prehistoric novels by Jean M. Auel, beginning with *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980) and culminating in *The Land of Painted Caves* (2010), contains a compelling vision of two species of human practising two utterly different kinds of religion. On the one hand there are the Neanderthals, who practice a pure totemism, while on the other there are the anatomically modern humans, whose religion centres on the worship of an Earth Goddess. Auel's heroine, Ayla, straddles both religious spheres, but she herself initiates a crisis within the anatomically modern human religious world. This article examines the different fictional religions in these popular and influential books, considers the sources Auel drew on in creating them and considers the influence these books may exert on public understanding of religion, including among future cohorts of students of religion.

In 1980, Jean M. Auel (b. 1936) published *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980). The book was an immediate success, rising to number 8 on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. A motion picture based on it was released in 1986 and Auel has produced 5 sequels since then.[1] These sequels were even more successful, the second one reaching number 2 and each of the last four taking the number one slot among the *NYT* bestsellers (Ericson 2011). The entire series[2] remains in print, and it has now found a new lease on life in the form of amazon.com e-books.[3]

Such levels of popularity lead to a self-sustaining effect, for fiction, if disseminated widely enough, can influence perceptions of reality (Ricoeur 1979). Just as the popular view of Victorian Britain has been subtly influenced by Doyle's Sherlock Holmes character, so we can expect Auel's vision of prehistoric religion to influence public perception of ancient belief systems. Students will arrive at university convinced that they know what Paleolithic religion was like. The public at large will regard it as a source document for ancient religion. This possibility alone makes it worth our while to investigate what that vision might be. Is Auel's presentation of Ice Age religion accurate? Does it draw on any existing theories and approaches? Is the series purely a product of Auel's imagination or does it draw on knowledge of existing and recent hunter-gatherer societies?

The Earth's Children series is prehistoric fiction, a fairly uncommon but surprisingly resilient literary genre that has been most extensively documented by Nicholas Ruddick in his book *The Fire in the Stone* (2009). There are two main forms of this kind of literature. Mainstream science fiction may incorporate prehistoric elements while making reference to the present-day, or to the future, of course. A good example of this would be Isaac Asimov's widely published novelette "The Ugly Little Boy" (1990), in which a young Neanderthal boy is temporarily brought to the present day.

Set against this, we find the pure form[4] of prehistoric fiction, not a form of science fiction, but a closely related genre in its own right, which is supposedly told solely from the point of view of the prehistoric characters.[5] Needless to say, this raises a hermeneutic question: can we realistically expect a story told by a contemporary author to reflect the mindset of a character living in the Paleolithic? But this problem arises in all literary genres except, perhaps, autobiography. We do not expect the writer of detective novels to actually be the serial killer he or she creates.

Auel's contribution to the genre lies in the way she has brought elements of a different genre, the romance novel, into prehistoric fiction. What scholarly attention her work has received has mainly focused on her feminist credentials, for example, the Ph.D. dissertation by Glenna Andrade, in which the first two novels are examined "via theories of political thought ... feminist theory ... and popular literature's (genre) appeals to various 80s readership communities" (2011: iii). I do not intend to focus on this aspect in the current essay, but it should be noted that Auel uses the differences between two human societies to highlight the superiority of a flexible, relatively non-sexist society over that of one with rigidly defined gender roles. An examination of the complete series in the light of gender theory will, however, have to wait for a later essay.

The series follows Ayla, an anatomically modern human (or Cro-Mangon)[6] who loses her family in an earthquake[7] at an early age and is adopted by a group

of Neanderthals.[8] By the end of *Cave Bear*, her inability to conform to the highly inflexible social structure of the Neanderthal tribe leads to her expulsion and she sets out to find members of her own species. The remaining books lead to her meeting with an anatomically modern traveler named Jondalar of the Zelandonii, their shared adventures and inventions among the various human societies they encounter, and particularly to the ups and downs of their relationship.

In some ways, Auel was remarkably prescient. Writing at a time (the 1980s) when paleoanthropological orthodoxy held that there could have been no interbreeding between modern humans and Neanderthals, she described such matings and the resulting offspring, but maintains that such liaisons were quite rare and the children subject to various kinds of genetic deficiencies. This closely approximates current thinking on the matter, although the latest hypothesis is that only male Neanderthals would have been able to interbreed with modern humans (Mason and Short 2011).

In other cases, her work goes far beyond the evidence. Her Neanderthals have remarkable parapsychological abilities, they are presented as tea-swilling athletes, and their sign-based language, indeed almost all their knowledge, is transmitted not culturally, but by way of a genetic link to the previous generations. There is no known way for DNA to transfer information at such a specific level. Here Auel strays away from prehistoric fiction into the realm of science fiction, where genetic memory is a theme, for example, in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series (Anonymous n.d.).

The modern humans fare no better. They come across as tea-swilling moral philosophers, especially in *Valley of Horses* (1982), and by the time we finish *Mammoth Hunters* (1985), Ayla and Jondalar have invented the spear thrower and the travois, and domesticated the horse, the dog and the cat, the last of these being represented by the cave lion (Panthera leo spelaea). By this time the critical reader is wondering what they will have come up with by the end of the series: the steam engine, perhaps?[9] It seems unreasonable that such diverse inventions of such a society-altering nature can be attributed to just two individuals. Is it then reasonable that the depiction of Ice Age religion is accurate?

But let us recall that prehistoric fiction is still fiction. It is not a dramatization of archaeological findings for reasons of public education. Auel took great pains to make her books reflect paleoanthropological knowledge as accurately as possible, but in the end, her driving concern is to tell her story, to allow her characters to express their thoughts and feelings, to let them interact with each other and with the greater forces they worship.

Which brings us to the role of religion in Earth's Children. Auel's prehistoric world displays a remarkable religious homogeneity. There are exactly two religions, each one co-extensive with the two species of humans that inhabit her world.

## Neanderthal Religion

Neanderthal religion is mainly described in *Cave Bear*, although references to it are made throughout the rest of the series. It is almost a textbook case of totemism, and Auel freely uses the term "totem".[10] Each individual has an animal assigned to him or her as a totemic guardian spirit. This totem is almost a Platonic form of the animal itself, and having a specific animal totem offers no special protection from the animal itself: in *Valley of Horses*, Ayla "backed up and turned west to skirt the lions' territory ... It was the spirit of the Cave Lion that protected her, not the great beast in it physical form. Just because he was her totem did not mean she was safe from attack" (Auel 1982: 443).

Every Clan[11] of Neanderthals also has a collective totem, the cave bear (Ursus spelaeus) acting in this capacity for the Clan in which Ayla is adopted. It is unclear whether the bear is the collective totem for all Neanderthals in Auel's world: the setting of the novels already has Neanderthal habitat split into isolated fragments by modern human settlement. However, if we recall that Neanderthal knowledge according to Auel was transmitted genetically rather than through education, which made Neanderthal society highly resistant to innovation, it seems reasonable to assume that the bear would have been such a pan-Neanderthal totem. Indeed, we see in *Plains of Passage* (1990) that while the Neanderthal clans speak a variety of "common languages", which are a combination of vocalization and gesture, there is also a single sacred language that is common to all Neanderthals, and which is transmitted purely on a genetic basis. The same may well be true of their religion.

Each clan has a religious specialist, a "mog-ur," whose main purpose is to communicate with the totems.[12] It is the mog-ur who allocates totems to newborn children, although the clan leader's assent is required. This kind of caesaro-papism occurs throughout *Cave Bear*: the clan leader may make the decision to expel a member, whereby that member becomes "dead" as far as the other clan members are concerned, but the mog-ur must perform the actual ceremony that makes this sentence effective. Scarification is used to mark the male individual with a permanent sign of his totem at his manhood ceremony, a ritual forbidden to the eyes of women.

There is a difference in the totems assigned to men and women. Men are associated with large and fierce animals (wild boars, wolves, aurochs etc.), while women's totems are smaller and less powerful animals (rabbit, roe deer, owl, etc.). The rationale for this difference is that conception, as Auel's Neanderthals understand it, is not related to sex, but to the battling between the spirits of a man and a woman. These spirits inherit the respective strengths of the man and womans' totems, and if a woman's totem is too powerful, this will make her defeat all male spirits and render her infertile. A major theme in the books, especially *Cave Bear*, is Ayla's association with her totem, the Cave Lion, and the

confusion the presence of such a powerful totemic presence brings into the life of a woman.

Another function of the mog-ur is to lead the men of the clan in regular nightly rituals in which a trance is induced by an extract from the datura plant. In these rituals the men make contact with their totems and the mog-ur asks them for guidance and assistance. Women have their own, separate rituals, and these too can involve the use of psychotropics.

In addition to the clan leader and mog-ur, who are always male, each clan also has a herbalist, who is inevitably female. Auel explains this as the result of the Neanderthals' genetic memory. No man would have the intimate knowledge of medicinal plants that is transmitted through the female line of healers from mother to daughter. Equally, no woman could have the knowledge of leadership and contact with the spirit world that is transmitted through the male line.

Towards the end of *Cave Bear*, the various Neanderthal clans in the area meet for their septennial Clan gathering. After much feasting and sporting events, the public climax of the gathering is the sacrifice of a tame bear by the most courageous and athletic young Neanderthal men. If we substitute spears for bows and arrows, Auel's description of the ceremony could have been taken directly from descriptions of the Ainu Bear sacrifice (see Batchelor 1967) that persisted into historical times on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. Indeed, Auel has filled in much detail that could never have made it into the archaeological record, from descriptions of practices among contemporary and near-contemporary hunter-gatherer societies. Did Neanderthals make herbal teas by dropping heated rocks into infusions contained in tightly woven baskets? We will probably never know.

Today, totemism would be regarded as an aspect of some religions, not as an entire religion in its own right. Among Auel's Neanderthals, though, it constitutes the bulk of religious belief and practice.

## Cro-Magnon Religion

The religion of the anatomically modern humans, the "Others" in Auel's novels is remarkably widespread. From Southern France to the steppes of the Ukraine,[13] Auel's world is inhabited by a number of tribes speaking mutually unintelligible languages. Despite this diversity, the religion of all these people is essentially the same, being centered on the worship of the Earth Mother, known by different names such as Doni and Mut. Here Auel taps into the thinking of people like Joseph Campbell: "Now in the neolithic village stage ... the focal figure of all mythology and worship was the bountiful goddess Earth as the mother and nourisher of life and receiver of the dead for rebirth" (Campbell 1991: 7).

She then proceeds to transcribe this hypothesis back into the Paleolithic. This

accords with some trends in contemporary matriarchistic thought, but unlike, for example, modern Wicca, Auel's Cro-Magnon religion is not bitheistic: The Great Earth Mother has no consort of any importance, although *Plains of Passage* does mention the moon being her mate. The moon only attains this status after She creates him though. The feminine primacy is also reflected in their creation myth, as recounted in *Painted Caves*: First Woman was created before First Man (Auel 2010: 3497).

Although no other deities are mentioned by name, at several points in *Plains of Passage* Ayla and Jondalar, traveling with their animals, are mistaken for evil spirits. Also, there are scattered references to lesser deities, psychopomps who return the dead to the Mother, so we may assume that Cro-Magnon religion is not entirely monotheistic. In *Plains of Passage* and *Shelters of Stone* (2002) we even find out that some Cro-Magnons, though not all, have totems.

It is Goddess-worship, though, that is the focal point of this religion, and the sacralization of sexuality plays a major role in it. Although these characters are supposedly unaware of the relation between sex and procreation,[14] seeing the former only as "Sharing Pleasures" in honor of the Mother, they, like the Neanderthals, do recognize that both a male and a female presence is required for conception to occur. To them, however, it is not a question of battling spirits. Instead, it is the Mother who chooses a particular male's spiritual essence and imparts it to the woman. Considering the free and easy promiscuity that Auel describes among these people, it seems a reasonable conclusion. But at this stage, it needs to be pointed out that while even in historical times there have been claims that certain people were quite unaware of the link between sex and procreation, dating back at least to Malinowski's research in the Trobriand Islands (Jolly 1992: 43-44), those claims have been subject to severe criticism (Pulman 2004; Delaney 1986).

There are still signs of an earlier totemistic phase in Auel's depiction of Cro-Magnon society. The Mamutoi name their settlements after various animals, for example the Wolf Camp and the Lion Camp, and within each camp the various hearths are also named after animals, with the Mammoth Hearth always being the most prestigious. In *Plains of Passage*, Jondalar attempts to reconcile the two strains of religious thought: "The spirit animals are all comfortable near Doni.[15] The Great Earth Mother created and gave birth to all of them" (Auel 1990: 3112).

Artistic representations of the Great Mother (donii) are of great importance in this religion and Auel describes them in sufficient detail that one can recognize the actual archaeological finds she based them on. One statuette in *Plains of Passage*, for example, clearly describes the Venus of Willendorf:[16] "Most of the donii he had seen had hardly more than a knob for the head ... This one had an elaborate hairstyle of rows of tight knobby curls that wen all the way around the head and face" (Auel 1990: 15067). Donii are placed in conspicuous

places when an encampment is temporarily abandoned, to warn travelers that the rightful owners intend to return. They are also used as the central focus of rituals.

Another aspect of this religion is the importance of caves and cave art, especially among the Zelandonii in southern France, an area with many caves. Auel describes the caves in sufficient detail in *Shelters of Stone* and *Painted Caves* that those familiar with the subject can identify the specific caves as these exist today. In these books, caves are explicitly linked to uterine symbolism: to enter a cave is to re-enter the womb of the great Earth Mother.

Like the Neanderthals, we see here that every small band of people has both a secular leader and a religious specialist, and they also form larger confederations in which the religious leadership, at least, arrange themselves into a hierarchy. Where the situation differs is that leadership in either capacity is open to both men and women.[17] Auel does not confuse matriarchy and matrilineality. The religious specialists also do double duty as herbalists, though some are more adept at this aspect of their position than others. The role of religious leader, it is suggested in several of the novels, also serves as a refuge for those with a same-sex orientation.

While there are families that supply the bulk of both kinds of leadership, occupation of either position ultimately depends on aptitude and inclination, not on heredity. In *Shelters of Stone* Ayla considers the leadership in this society: "Caves usually chose their leaders well, but had Joharran been unable to fulfill the position, the Cave would have simply shifted to a more adequate leader" (Auel 2002: 5309). Compare this to Neanderthal clan leadership, as described in the next paragraph: "Broud ... was destined to be the next leader from the moment he was born. Since he was born to the mate of the leader, it was believed he would have the memories for it." Whether the leadership is of a secular or a spiritual nature, the difference between the two species is described in stark terms.

The relationship between secular and religious authorities is less clearly defined than among the Neanderthals. There seems to be much seeking for consensus at joint meetings, and a fluid boundary between secular and profane is constantly mediated between them. Only at indisputably religious occasions, such as a funeral, do the shamans exert their authority and direct events without brooking dissent. But even then, there are muttered objections, not necessarily from the secular leaders, but even from ordinary people. *Shelters of Stone* presents one such occasion, where Ayla's position in the order of precedence at a funeral is disputed.

*Painted Caves* tells the story of Ayla's years of training for and eventual entry into the shaman class. Despite this, we learn little that is new about Cro-Magnon religion. The first half of the book sees her on a tour of the caves of Southern France, which becomes a litany of repetitive cave art viewings. The second half

deals with the disruption caused by Ayla's revelation to Cro-Magnon society that conception is a physical rather than a spiritual event. In-between, we learn something about the numbering system these people use and the importance of colour to their culture and religion, but little emerges that challenges the picture painted in the previous books.

## Conclusion

Both the religions invented by Auel for this series of novels maintain the existence of an afterlife, and in *Cave Bear* and *Shelters of Stone*, respectively, we are given extensive descriptions of funerary rituals. But it cannot be said that this is the central focus in either religion. It is taken for granted that one will die and enter the world of the spirits, or be called back to the presence of the Mother, as the case may be. There is no differentiation between the post-mortem destinations of the pious and the impious, only the need to avoid becoming a wandering evil spirit, temporarily caught between this life and the next.

In the main, these are this-worldly religions. The emphasis in both is to gain spiritual assistance from the spiritual powers-that-be for quite mundane matters. And Auel's world is not a peaceful paradise. Mutual animosity and prejudice between the two species of humans is a major theme, the Cro-Magnons regard the Neanderthals as mere animals, while the Neanderthals, although they recognize the human status of the "Others", regard them as not very bright, since they lack the Neanderthal genetic memories.

Thieves, rapists, tyrants and murderers frequent the pages of the Earth's Children series. Even the religious specialists are depicted warts and all. They too can fall under the thrall of a tyrannical leader (*Plains of Passage*) or engage in petty rivalries (*Shelters of Stone*" and *Painted Caves*). In Auel's Ice Age world, as in our own, we see the truth of the assessment that religion makes good people better and bad people worse.[18]

Here and there we can observe other religious themes in Auel's work that do not really fit in well with either of the two religions in her work. In *Shelters of Stone*, Ayla has a vision of her two sons, one half-Neanderthal, the other a modern human, about to engage in combat. The Cain-and-Abel motif is unmistakable. Elsewhere, in *Painted Caves*, Ayla is informed in another vision that "The Mother is gone, only the Son remains" (Auel 2010: 16505 ff.). This could be interpreted as a reference to the Christianity of the far future. But such passages are few and far between and do not really influence the series as a whole.

In the end, we do not really know what sort of religions existed thirty thousand years ago. We know that both Neanderthals and their Cro-Magnon successors buried their dead, but in what context? Did the Neanderthals have a religion based on close identification with totemic animal spirits? Did the Cro-

Magnons worship the Great Earth Mother and expect to return to her? Both of these conclusions lie at the end of long, tortuous chains of reasoning, each step of which is plausible enough, but which in totality does not give us a basis for stating our findings with certainty.

The Great Earth Mother thesis, in particular, while popular among feminist theoreticians who follow the work of Marija Gimbutas, has come under severe criticism, even from other feminist scholars (Stange 1993). In any case, Gimbutas' research findings concern the difference between Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures. Auel projects this thesis back an additional 25,000 years. It could well be that whatever religion existed that long ago would have been utterly incomprehensible to us today. That statuettes and cave painting dating back to the Paleolithic have been found is undeniable. What these artistic representations meant to those distant ancestors who created them is a matter of speculation, for the scholar of religion as much as for the novelist.

It is therefore fruitless to ask whether Auel's depiction of Ice Age religion is accurate. The Earth's Children series of books is a work of fiction. It is prehistoric fiction that tries to stick as closely as possible to the known facts of archaeology, intersperses observations from near-contemporary hunter-gatherer cultures, and presents them within an attractive narrative framework. This may not be exactly the Ice Age as it was. It certainly is the Ice Age as it should have been.

## Notes

1 Auel has declared that there will be no further volumes in the series, indeed, that it was envisaged as a six-volume series from the start (Anonymous 2011). This was widely reported at the time of the publication of *Painted Caves*. Since then, however, the possibility of a seventh book in the series has been mooted (Italie 2010). Indeed, *Painted Caves* ends with a number of loose threads and it would not be surprising to see the series completed one day, if not by the now-aging Auel herself, then by another author authorized by her estate. This is a fairly common occurrence in the world of popular novels. By way of comparison, there have been eighteen new James Bond-inspired novels by other authors published since the death of Ian Fleming, the latest being *Carte Blanche* (2012) by Jeffery Deaver.

2 The entire series, collectively referred to as Earth's Children, now consists of the following volumes:
- *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980)
- *The Valley of Horses* (1982)
- *The Mammoth Hunters* (1985)
- *The Plains of Passage* (1990)
- *The Shelters of Stone* (2002)
- *The Land of Painted Caves* (2010)

3 The Amazon Kindle version of all these books were used in researching this article,

and page references to direct quotations reflect the Kindle "locations," rather than page numbers in the printed editions.

4 While Earth's Children is mostly pure prehistoric fiction, there are a few episodes in which the characters, during drug-induced trances, view a world that the contemporary reader will immediately recognize as our own. These episodes are minor interruptions in the general flow of the narrative, however, and they do not invalidate the status of the series as a whole as being pure prehistoric fiction.

5 Pure prehistoric fiction could not arise before there was a certain level of knowledge about prehistory on which to base it, and Ruddick's analysis of the genre does reveal that it has only existed since the second half of the nineteenth century. Examples of pure prehistoric fiction include J.-H. Rosny's 1911 novel *La Guerre du feu*, on which the 1981 film *Quest for Fire* was based.

6 Today popularly known as the Cro-Magnons, though the term is scrupulously avoided by Auel, who refers to them at first as the Others (from a Neanderthal perspective), and later by the names of their various tribes, such as the Zelandonii and the Mamutoi. Paleoanthropologists no longer use the term Cro-Magnon, preferring "Anatomically Modern" or "Early Modern Humans". However, the term remains sufficiently current and recognizable to serve our present purposes. Like "Neanderthal", the term "Cro-Magnon" is quite neutral in origin—both refer to the location where the first fossils of these people were found.

7 Earthquakes serve as something of a *deus ex machina* in *Cave Bear*: a second earthquake bookends the story and notifies the reader that once again, Ayla is about to lose the only family she has known.

8 Another term not used by Auel: these people refer to themselves as the Clan, while their anatomically modern cousins call them Flatheads.

9 In *Valley of the Horses*, Jondalar and his brother also travel on a large boat of sophisticated design, more than 20 000 years before any such conveyance is known to have existed. The temporal setting of the novels is approximately 30 000 years before the present, just before the last major glaciation and the extinction of the Neanderthals. There are several claimants for the title of "oldest boat," but no remains have been excavated that date to more than 7 000 years BP. Since the initial writing of this article, however, the finding of Mousterian (Neanderthal) tools on remote Greek islands have raised the question of how those people could have gotten there, if not by boat.

10 Auel freely plunders classical and modern languages other than English to supply terminology to her prehistoric characters, using the Latin "Ursus" as the name of the Neanderthal Cave bear totem, and the French "élan" for the Cro-Magnon concept of the human spirit. In addition, the plural forms of the Cro-Magnon tribes' names positions them in terms of later historic developments: the "Mamutoi" of the Ukrainian steppes and the "Sharamudoi" of the Danube are proto-Greek while the "Zelandonii" of South-western France are proto-Italic.

11 In Auel's usage of the term, "clan" in lower case identifies a small band of hunter-gatherers, while "Clan" (capitalized) indicates a larger confederation of such bands.

12 Creb, the mog-ur of Ayla's clan, is the pre-eminent shaman of the entire Clan, and is often referred to as *the* Mog-ur.

13 And possibly beyond: in *Plains of Passage*, Jondalar mentions having travelled to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, and does not mention any religious oddities among the people he met there.

14 Establishing this connection is yet another conceptual leap made by that remarkable polymath Ayla. Her discovery triggers a religious and social revolution among the Cro-Magnons that is one of the many loose threads in *Painted Caves*.

15 Doni - The name of the Great Earth Mother in the Zelandonii language. But it can also mean something analogous to "angel." In *Valley of Horses*, Jondalar's brother Thonolan flatters a woman by mistaking her for a doni ready to take him to the Mother.

16 See http: //arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/.

17 Among the Mamutoi tribe, the secular leadership is always shared by a brother and sister.

18 Attributed to H. Richard Niebuhr.

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